

SELF-RESPECT: DEVELOPING A FEMINIST APPROACH TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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L'éthique moderne – telle que construite par les hommes – se base en grande partie sur des principes abstraits; elle ignore l'individu et son interaction dans une série de relations. Les moralistes féministes sont partisans d'une morale enracinée dans notre sentiment de connexion aux autres. L'auteure affirme que la base de la vie morale est plus personnelle et plus particulière encore: l'individu doit d'abord découvrir un sens de soi en se tournant vers l'intérieur, pour échapper aux valeurs culturelles imposées de l'extérieur – celles-ci pouvant invalider les valeurs personnelles. Une fois l'autonomie et le respect de soi établis, l'individu peut s'engager dans des relations plus créatives avec les autres, en tant que personne morale complète.

Modern moral philosophy is dominated by theories that ignore a crucial aspect of moral life. Obsessed with the idea that morality consists in adhering to principles that 'any rational agent' would follow, the dominant moral theories overlook the individual and the concrete.

This failure is clearly exemplified in the case of Amy, discussed by Carol Gilligan in her influential book *In a Different Voice*.¹ Amy, a bright, well-adjusted girl was matched, in a study of moral development, with an equally bright and well-adjusted boy from the same socio-economic background. They were given a test designed to rate them on their abilities to resolve moral dilemmas according to a scale developed by Lawrence Kohlberg at Harvard. In Kohlberg's view, the higher stages of moral development are characterized by the ability to think in terms of abstract principles.

In this case Amy and her counterpart were asked to think about how Heinz should solve his problem, namely, that his wife was dying and in need of a life-saving drug which he could not afford to buy. The question was: should

Heinz steal the drug from the druggist? The boy dealt with the question fairly succinctly by seeing it as a matter of placing principles in a hierarchical order. The principle of preserving life was, he thought, higher than the principle of preservation of property. Amy took an entirely different approach by trying to suggest that Heinz get some help from friends or relatives. At this suggestion the interviewer tried to explain to Amy that she had failed to understand the question. He repeated the question, and again Amy tried to find some support system for poor Heinz. The interviewer responded with exasperation, implying that Amy had got it all wrong. At this point Amy became confused and produced a faltering and incoherent answer.

This case illustrates the way in which an entire outlook can be invalidated by a predominantly abstract, allegedly rational approach to moral life. The boy was rated as more advanced morally because he had treated the problem as a mathematical exercise. Amy was misunderstood and her viewpoint invalidated when she sought a solution in the special features of the situation and in a network of relationships.

But it is precisely this ability to focus on the individual and the particular that is missing in the dominant moral theories of the day. A moral theory based upon abstraction ignores the particular embodied individual acting within a nexus of relationships. Furthermore, the moral agent is thought to be passive: moral life is seen as a matter of conforming to ready-made abstract principles.

But moral life is not a matter of adhering to principles that would be agreed to by all 'rational' agents. The ideal of a rational agent is itself a myth under which particular moral values are disguised.

While feminist moral philosophers advocate a moral theory based upon our sense of relatedness to others, I believe that the basis of moral life is even more personal and particular than this. Only to

the extent that the individual is able to get in touch with her own unique sense of self, and withdraw from the meanings and values of others, can she return to the social context as a complete moral person.

The first prerequisite of a satisfactory relationship to others is a satisfactory relationship to one's own self. This is a difficult lesson for women to learn, socialized as we have been to sacrifice our own needs and respond to those of others. In so doing we have left ourselves open to invalidation and learned to accept ridicule when we did appeal to intuition and feelings.

Many feminists have pointed out how debilitating it is for women to be constantly deferring to the judgements and values of others. Self-doubt and a divided sense of self result from ignoring one's own experience in favor of external authority. Feminists have begun to reclaim values that have been undermined in this male-dominated society. In *Toward a New Psychology of Women* Jean Baker Miller has observed that two of the many values stressed by feminists are sensitivity to, and expression of, the emotional qualities that are inherent in all experience, and taking responsibility for the formation of one's own values.²

The way to take responsibility for one's own values is to turn inward to that incredibly rich realm of feelings and awarenesses underlying and accompanying all our waking and sleeping moments. The process of turning inward can be done in countless ways: journal writing, meditation, reflection on dreams, Jungian art, the martial arts, yoga, tai chi, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, to name some. These methods and others can all be used as channels to the self and as ways of charting the undulating, ever-changing borders of the I and the not-I.

Excellent and dramatic examples of this process of self-discovery and self-validation can be found in Susie Orbach's book *Fat is a Feminist Issue*.³ Many women, including the author herself, discovered

through exercises in active imagination (imagining being in a particular situation and paying close attention to the feelings evoked) their own values, and found that these were in strong opposition to some of the values that are continually advocated in this society. We are incessantly exposed to advertisements extolling the merits of being thin, sexy, young in appearance and the consumer of products designed to enhance that image. Thousands of women desperately try to lose weight and find themselves obsessed with food.

Some of these women joined Susie Orbach in an attempt to get at the feelings and values underlying their distressing struggles. Many discovered, to their surprise, that their compulsion to eat represented a very real objection to the pressures to conform to trivial and even contradictory views of what a woman should be. In their resistance to the cultural ideal they were affirming their own sense that the cultural ideal was void. By

turning inward and acknowledging their own meanings and values they were able to find positive ways of affirming themselves and of refusing to be invalidated for failing to conform to socially imposed norms.

But how can we reconcile the need to turn inward with the positive value of women's great capacity for intense, emotionally connected cooperation with, and sensitivity to, others? In *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* Eugene Gendlin observed: "Women are encouraged to believe that if they do go through the mental and emotional struggle of self-development, the end result will be disastrous – they will forfeit the possibility of having any close relationships. This penalty, this threat of isolation is intolerable for anyone to contemplate."⁴

There are two things to keep in mind in trying to reconcile these apparently opposing requirements. Self-knowledge and self-validation cannot be achieved in

complete isolation from others; supportive relationships and dialogue with others are crucial (there is abundant evidence of this in the women's movement). Yet many relationships can prevent a person from coming to know her own real values. And when that happens she acts on the basis of wrong meanings and values that do not further her development.

It is utterly amazing how little recognition is given to the power others have over our experiencing process. There are countless ways, verbal and non-verbal, of invalidating people and causing them to feel uncomfortable and uncertain of their feelings. Roberto Mangabeira Ungar sensitively expresses this power:

What occurs to me, and how I live as we speak and interact, is vitally affected by every word and motion you make, and by every facial expression and attitude you show. . . It is not merely a matter of what I think you feel about me. Much more, I am

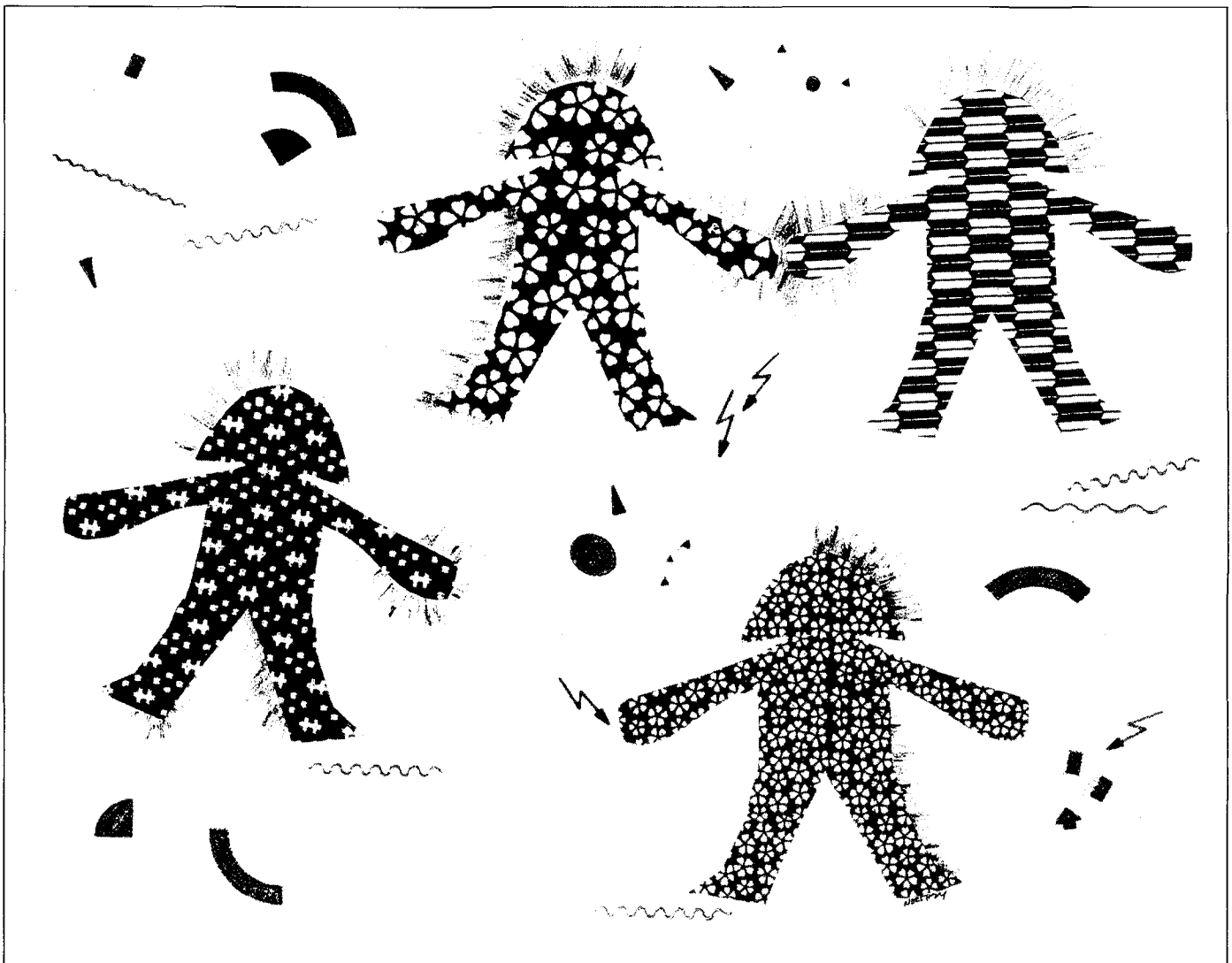


Illustration: Jane Northey

affected even without stopping to notice it by every response you give me. I experience your response.⁵

The danger, then, is not that by turning inward I might become isolated from others; on the contrary, the danger is that by too much responsiveness to others I might be diverted from my own self-awareness and isolated from myself.

The inward turn, rather than removing a person from contact with others, puts her into deeper and more satisfying relationships. This increase in self-knowledge heightens her sense of herself as a creator of meaning and of value, and permits her to imagine and respect that originality in other people.

By coming to recognize her own originality and autonomy in the area of meanings and values a person becomes more open to others, for she need no longer defend herself against the imposition of alien meanings and values. And a further

consequence of experiencing herself as a creative moral agent is her increased awareness of the futility of conversations, or even relationships, with people who seek to impose their absolutist values on her. She is then free to move toward supportive and mutually respecting interactions with others.

The further a person reaches into her own self, the further she can reach into deeper relations with others. Recognizing her own capacity for creativity and originality, she can imagine others to be creative and original as well. Real respect for herself leads to real respect for others. Autonomy, which leads to greater affiliation, is not to be confused with isolation. Affiliation is the condition and the consequence of identifying a personal realm of meaning and value.

¹Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Develop-*

ment (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 28-9.

²Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 19.

³Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1983).

⁴Eugene Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), p. 9.

⁵Roberto Mangabeira Ungar, *Passion, An Essay on Personality* (New York: The Free Press, MacMillan, 1984); cited in *The New York Times* (July 8, 1984), Book Review Section, p. 24.

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I touch my meat
red, bloody – raw and white
fresh now – pure, for the moment
smell the moistness
succulent juices, tart and sweet
aging well, quietly fermenting within
muscle and bone – a tendon sheath
I know the contours still
taught, slippery – impressionable all the same
marinated in good taste
the odd basting in self-control

Pound for pound – prime cut – ripe
to be devoured rare – well done in any medium

I draw my hand along the wetness
searching out that wrinkled pink flesh
most delicate filet in this musky tenderloin
slicing through each meaty layer
needing just one taste – wanting all
stack upon stack of slithery slices

The morsel is found
an arm's length away

I awake
and there you stand
Butcher-wrapped
and ready to roast

Sandra Dempsey
Calgary, Alberta

So pick it up and hold it
like it's rare and old
But you'll drop it in a minute
or so I'm told
You have a thought that's yours
and it's oh so strong
But so-and-so says otherwise
maybe you're wrong

Now it's not so very long ago
you held me high
So you'll pardon my sadness
as I watch you die
It's not so much a question
of liver and spunk
But that age-old plummet
to a wretched funk

So sue me for liable
when I say you're dead
But it wouldn't have hurt so
if I'd seen ahead
So much glitter and diamond
hard to the core
But the lion I loved
barely squeaked a roar

I played my best cards
and I bet all my trust
But you folded early
and now – I'm empty with lust

Sandra Dempsey
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